

# ANALYZING AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE PRODUCTS TO EXPLORE CULTURAL VALUES

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## Abstract

*Language and culture are two parts of cannot be separated each other, because culture is in language. The other side, to study English language as a foreign language in Indonesia, as same as study the English's culture. To understand the culture is means to make a communication be fluently between the speakers and make the effective communication because culture as a basic of communication. To communicate is not only talk about the understanding of linguistic, but must understand about the paralanguage include kinesics, tone, the characteristic of sound, gesture and the expression of face that we can see when the interaction by communicate is happen. By the growing of America, the America culture become a means for the English students, especially for the young generation in many countries like the people in Indonesia, the table manner, relationship, and the life style become the size of somebody status. This life style become the growing reflection of somebody that have been followed by the people in many countries in the world, and this life style become a symbol of individual social status. The electronic media such as television, film, etc that have been succeeded to make the students of Indonesia bring the America-English and their life style be popular.*

*Key words: Language, culture, communication, social status.*

## Analisa Produk Budaya Populer Amerika untuk Menjelajahi Nilai Budaya

### Abstrak

Bahasa dan budaya adalah dua bagian yang tidak bisa dipisahkan satu sama lain, karena budaya terdapat dalam bahasa. Dengan kata lain, mempelajari bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing di Indonesia, sama halnya dengan mempelajari budaya Inggris. Memahami budaya berarti mempelancar komunikasi antar pembicara dan membuat komunikasi efektif, karena budaya sebagai dasar dalam komunikasi. Berkomunikasi bukan hanya sekedar penguasaan unsur – unsur linguistik, tetapi juga penguasaan paralanguage mencakup kinesik, nada, ciri – ciri suara, aksen, selingkung, gesture, dan ekspresi wajah, yang tampak ketika terjadi interaksi komunikasi. Sejalan dengan kemajuan Negara Amerika, budaya Amerika juga menjadi acuan bagi pembelajar bahasa Inggris, khususnya bagi kaula muda di negara – negara berkembang, seperti halnya di Indonesia, pola hidup makan, pergaulan, dan pamanpilan menjadi ukuran status seseorang. Gaya hidup seperti ini menjadi refleksi kemajuan seseorang yang banyak ditiru di banyak Negara di dunia, dan pola hidup seperti ini melambangkan status sosial secara individual. Media elektronik seperti televisi, film, dan lainnya telah berhasil membuat pembelajar di Indonesia mempopulerkan American – English dan gaya hidup mereka.

Kata Kunci : bahasa dan budaya; komunikasi; status sosial.

## A. INTRODUCTION

Due to use of English as the main global language, it has become the most extensively learnt language in the world. More and more Indonesians would agree that is considered global – or at the least modern – only if she has educated herself with a sound knowledge of English, such as; reading, writing, listening, and most importantly in speaking. Consequently, English courses keep on mushrooming in almost every city in Indonesia. English programs in universities, teaching colleges, and academies generally receive applicants more than other language problem.

In the field of the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL), it has long been recognized that the forms and uses of a given language reflect the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. In other words, language and culture are intricately interwoven. Anytime a person speaks in a language, he automatically (to a certain extent) aligns himself with the culture of the language. Thus, a TEFL program is fundamentally a foreign culture learning. This phenomenon could be obviously seen the individuals who frequently use English. To a greater or lesser extent, they are apt to be more tolerant to things previously uncommon, like egalitarian lecturer – student relationship or putting a newborn in his own room, separated from his parents. They also tend to be more open to discussing things that are common in the English native speakers' culture, such as pre – marital sex, although to most Indonesians they used to be considered as a taboo.

Such a change of attitude is interesting to discover. But, what is the explanation behind the change related to the relationship between language and culture? This paper introduces some common American cultural values and discusses how Indonesian can properly apply them while communicating in English. Such knowledge is very important because, as Samovar et al. (1981 : 3) accentuates, “culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages, may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. “One’s knowledge of English language’s cultural values will prevent him from using English cultural knowledge makes communication in English more effective.

## B. DISCUSSION

### 1. Language and Culture in TEFL

The term culture could be associated to the Latin *Cultivare* from which the English ‘cultivate’, which means ‘prepare (land) for crops by ploughing (plowing), etc. in order to develop something (Horby, 1984: 210) is derived. Despite this etymological understanding, the question: What is

culture? Is not an easy to answer due to the complexity of the nature of culture. Even some decades ago, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1954) found over three hundred definitions of culture in their study. Nonetheless, the development of culture. The following section will briefly summarize it.

On a general level, culture has been referred to as “the ways of a people” (Lado, 1957: ). This perspective includes both ‘material’ manifestations of culture that are easily seen and ‘non – material’ ones that are more difficult to observe. Mc Omie (1990:178) defines culture as “the result of the mass cultivation of a certain way to seeing, thinking, assuming, believing, and behaving in the members of a society”. According to Wilson (1995: 4) and Geertz (2003) culture is “all of the customs and practices” handed down from generation to generation such as the “churches, the state and the media, ..... standards of behavior, laws and conventional practices and custom. Larson and Smalley (1972: 39) describe culture as a “blue print” that guides the behavior of people in a community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behavior in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. Culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group. Different cultures are the underlying structure which make Round community round and Square community square.

In accordance with them, Haviland (1974: 264) notes that “culture ... is not observable behavior of a group of people, but abstraction derived from it. Culture is a set of rules or standards which, when acted upon by members of a society, produce behavior that falls within the range of variance that members consider proper and acceptable”.

In the field of TEFL, the English language teaching is viewed as being intertwined with the teaching of the native speaker’s culture. There is a recollection that “language as code reflects cultural preoccupations” (Kramsch, 2001: 4). In this sense, language is a culture functioning as the main vehicle to express cultural customs and ways of life. Thus, it is widely accepted that a language teaching is also a culture teaching because one’s understanding of the native speakers’ culture provides him with a suitable foundation to listen, speak, read, and write, in the language. Culture is essentially the foundation of communication.

## 2. What is popular Culture?

According to Wilson (1995: 5) culture is divided into the elite (the rich and the ruling classes) and the common (the culture of everyone in the society). To grasp a more comprehensive of this division, reviewing its historical background is very advantageous. During the Middle Ages, the caste system had separated the elite from the folk culture of street carnivals, tavern drinking and the folk tales. Because of political

democracy in the nineteenth century, public education and the Industrial Revolution have in the term of popular culture, which replaced the term folk culture. In other words, popular culture is originated from the folk culture, or the culture of the common people. Nowadays it refers to all entertainment and produced or shared through the mass media which makes a culture popular.

Popular culture is everywhere. It is manifested around the world through movies, dancing music, television shows, newspaper, satellite broadcast, fast food and clothing, among other entertainment and consumer goods. Petracca and Sorapure (1998: 1) explain that it can be “absorbed at home watching television, listening to the street; chatting over coffee at work; going out to ... fast – food restaurant, shopping mall, and sport arenas; even noticing the graffiti that glares out at you on buildings and highway overpasses. Based on this, we can say that popular culture include product such as popular music CDs, which apart from their variety stress on their individual personality; cheap paperback novels, soap operas and movies, which serve the ideally beautiful and rich heroine or strong, handsome and adventurous hero, and a myriad of advertised products from designer Levi’s jeans that symbolizes the individual expression of living a rugged – free life, arches of Mc Donalds deliciously practical hamburgers to disposable razors that symbolizes modern technology have make icons of the contemporary popular culture (Wilson, 1995: 6).

A particular characteristic of popular culture is that although its products are quickly eye catching and famous, they are transitory by nature. For instance, a TV program like RCTI’s Who Wants to Be a Millionaire could quickly reached the highest rating, but it soon lost its popularity and was replaced by other program; new expression supersede former favorites, for example the expression ‘emangnya gue pikirin’ had been replaced by ‘kasian deh, lu’; and unknown entertainers become celebrities over night like what happened to Indonesian Idol singer Joy Tobing and dangdut singer Inul. If these icons or symbols survive they can become high or elite culture, like what happened with Chairil Anwar’s poems, Bethoven’s musics, and The Beatles’ songs.

### 3. Values Represented in American Culture

An analysis on the values and pattern of culture could be conducted by using some approaches. However, for the discussion in this article let’s take Stewart and Bennet’s (1961: 61) approach which claim that analyzing American cultural values and patterns the components: form of activity, form of relations to others, and perception of the self, usually represent the stereotype of Americans who are judged as ‘carefree’, ‘easygoing’, ‘open – minded’, and ‘independent’ people. The following background of the values can be stepping – stone for Indonesians who want to better

understand the reason for why an American culture stands out as they are today.

4. Form of activity

a. Success as a Goal

One thing almost everyone is agreed on, including Americans, is that they place a very high value upon success. Success does not necessarily mean material rewards, but recognition of a businessman, that's all right. But the bigger his church and congregation, the more successful; he is judged to be.

There are at least three factors that contributed to the emphasis on success. The first factor is the Puritan belief in the virtue of work. Also called "Protestant Ethic" or simply the "work ethic", this belief motivates people to work hard in order to succeed. They believed that the material rewards they got were a sign of God's love. The second factor is the rich opportunity in a land waiting to be settled during the early settlement of America. As illustrated in Horatio Alger's *American Dream*, many Americans believed that all individuals, no matter how poor, were capable of becoming wealthy as long as they were diligent and virtuous. Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, (1925) is probably one of the modern novels that depict this belief. Finally, for almost all American society is generally without ranks and classes. A person's prestige can be judged only based on his achievement. That's why Americans prefer to ask, "what do you want to BE?". In other words, Americans emphasize more on "doing" than on "being".

b. Orientation to Action in Achieving a Goal

The orientation to action is frequently conceived as the act of decision – making. For Americans casual conversation about goals, summer jobs, and extend travel may be justified as deciding on a career. In a more formal sense, defining a goal of what to do in the future with its clarification serve as a guide to effective actions for Americans to have the responsibility for setting their own directions. For them, clarity, is more preferable than ambiguity and contemplation should lead to action. It is for this reason that American children are encouraged early on to believe that they are the judges of what they want and should do. Even if they are shown unable to decide on something, they prize the illusion that they can.

The decision – making for the American culture is, however, localized in the individual. As a comparison, a typical formal or semiformal group decision made by Indonesians who are grouping for a voice, preferably that of a chairperson, who will express the group's consensus is usually perceived by Americans as lacking of leadership.

This most likely explains why in a classroom situation Indonesian student show their reluctance to express their individual opinion, whereas those having an American open mind would compete for a chance to speak. This competition business for Americans is one sure way to motivate the rest of the group to do something fruitful because “where there’s a will. There’s a way” (Stewart and Bennet, 1991: 82). Unfortunately, for Indonesians the opposite situation usually comes up. The struggle for winning a basketball game, for example, may not be reached satisfactory because the individual sacrificed his unique skills for the better performance of the group whose concept of togetherness is thicker – even though through this togetherness they fail to be winner.

c. Work, Play, and Friendship

With the important concept of “doing something is better than nothing” as discussed above, Americans, therefore, love work. It is meat and drink to them. They also highly respect those who still work for a company during their retirement or old age. Yet, Americans see that there is a need in separating work from play, because work is done for a living; it is what people need to do though not necessarily enjoying it. Play, on the other hand, is “relief from the drudgery of the regularity of work” (Stewart and Bennet, 1991: 71 – 72). It is pursued for enjoyment in its own right even though many engages on it with effort that would kill a horse. If it’s a vacation, they travel five or six hundred miles an hour, pause only long enough to snap pictures, and then discover what it was they went to see when they get home and look at the photographs.

‘Work and no play’ or similarly ‘play and no work’ is an American culture that is greatly valued by the people. Seldom do we hear the discussion about the work’s activity during an outdoor family gathering although sitcom which stars Eddie Murphy is never out of telling jokes. It seems, the Indonesians have engulfed the culture as it is, because traditionally they feel that talking about work during their playtime and vice versa is a regular activity. Some even regard that working without giving out jokes will decrease their work creativity.

The American’s various compartments of friendship that is usually kept separate have also influenced the value of separating work and play activities. A friendship that is centered on the office is made assured to not intrude into the relations with friends who participate in recreational activities. Consequently, Americans can perform their work activities with a professional standard.

d. Time is Money management and Obligation

Contemporary American values of time can be traced back to colonial days in Virginia where an early change in attitude toward time and labor occurred. The discovery of tobacco's profitable production in colonial Jamestown impelled agents of the Virginia Company to manipulate land and labor so they can maximize their production. By the 1620s, the concept of 'time thrift' and Benjamin Franklin's admonition, 'remember that time is money' have, in particular, boosted the necessity of having clocks in every American household (Brown, 1976: 43 – 44). Time thrift is the basis for measuring productivity by output per unit of time rather than by the quality of the product. As a consequence, Americans see the necessity of making sure they can always meet their own deadlines.

The orientation toward time is not culturally the same among different cultures. For example, Latin Americans orient themselves to the present time. Indonesians, by comparison usually orient themselves to the past and turn on tradition for the guidance. The dominant Americans, often value the future more. In this case, Stewart and Bennet explain that the future for Americans is not measured in decades like the Brazilians but in a reachable projection (1991: 74 – 75). Thus, it becomes customary for American employees to write out his own work objectives for the next year or so as a criterion to evaluate his performance. Americans are known to hold their obligations highly, that is why they usually set deadlines that are feasible.

The Indonesian's Javanese in this situation, in contrast, may be uncomfortable with this concept, since it is in opposite with the saying *alon – alon waton kelakon* – it's better to do things one wonder that American guests are often bewildered to know that Indonesians would come to gathering later than the appointed time. Consequently, Indonesians who already know the value of time would make their best effort to come to meetings earlier.

5. Form of Relations to Others

a. Social Status and Equality :

Although sociologists speak of class structure and status obligation in American society, most Americans see themselves as members of an egalitarian middle class (Stewart and Barnett, 1991: 89). There are variations in parts of New England and in the Southeast, where the status and position occupied in the social structure carry influence, but generally in the American society – social background, money or power best of fewer advantages than any other major society.

The concept of all middle class structure allows Americans to value the motivation of bringing equality in their principles. International relations are typically horizontal and conducted between presumed equals. When a personal confrontation is required between two persons of different hierarchical levels, there is a tendency to establish an atmosphere of equality. For example, a commanding officer in the films Pearl Harbour and Titanic would “pull his rank” nor “use his authority as a truth”. When making conversations the officer is seated in an eye – to – eye level – with his subordinate.

By contrast, the Indonesian majority would do just the opposite. Indonesians would not dare look in the eyes of their superior since it is impolite to do so. Unfortunately, some Indonesians who want to follow the American ways sometimes over do the idea of equality. For example, a student may be too frank and too friendly with his teacher becomes minimal. Because of trying to achieve equality, some Indonesians may even deliberately or accidentally commit corruption and nepotism to obtain individual profit. In this case, Americans cannot see how the loyalty of members in an organization may be the principle that explains for unintelligible actions and promotions. This is because the belief that everyone has equal talent and ability, hence, the emergence of a promotion means waiting the right opportunity instead of making advantages of a relationship.

b. Informality, Directness, and Friendship :

Based on the concept of equality above, when Americans exchange glances directly into each other’s eyes they are at the same time conveying inform, spontaneity and friendship. In introductions, as well as in general conversations, Americans speakers maintain frequent eye contact. Eye coontact is important because insufficient or excessive eye contact may create communication barriers. It is one of aspects of non – verbal communication that effectively indicates intimacy, influence, and attention. In a conversation with an American, too little eye contact may be considered as an indication of a lack of interest, inattention, or even mistrust. Most Americans “never trust a person who can’t look them in the eyes”. Yet, most people become nervous if frequent eye contact turns into staring. So, normal eye contact is preferable. As discussed before, however, direct eye contact for an Indonesian means impoliteness and failure of giving respect to those of a higher social rank. So, if an Indonesian teenager decides to follow behavior when talking to their elders, it is considered unfriendly.

The casual style of the Americans for example, the habit of chatting casually with waitresses or strangers in public places in at the same time irritating yet also a behaviour envied by other cultures. The



British playwright, Stoppard, have captured this in his *Dirty Linen* and *New – Found – Land* as follows:

Americans are very modern people ..... They are open people too. They wear their hearts on their sleeves. They take people as they are. They make no distinction about a man's background, parentage, (and) education. They say what they mean and there is a vivid muscularity about the way they say it. They admire everything about them without reserve or pretence or scholarship. They are always the first to put their hands in their pockets. They press you to visit them in their own home the moment they meet you, and are irrepressible, good humored, ambitious, and brimming self – confidence any company (1976: 59 – 60).

#### 6. Competition, Cooperation, and Fair Play

In the event of obtaining better future, Americans gear themselves into a competition that occurs within the context of cooperation. This is because competition requires considerable amount of coordination among individuals and groups. Stewart and Bennet elaborate that “typical American ability to cooperate is one of the most important assets of advisors and managers” (1991: 106). They are well known for this characteristic because they do not commit whole heartedly to a group or organization. Instead, they pursue their individual goal while cooperating with other who are willing to pursue their group's needs. This quality possibly explains why, to the Indonesian mind, Americans are perceived to be strongly individualistic in reaching for their goals.

The separation between membership in a group and personal objectives allow the Americans to adjust his goal for a joint action with members of the group. The sense of urgency and the value of getting things done in meeting a deadline allow the American to show his ability in organizing complicated events. Each person in the group is not asked to throw their individual goals, but instead, each person is asked to accommodate themselves to a joint action which is analogous to a “Dutch treat”.

Americans believe that the compromise is fair for every individual. By perceiving that everyone has fairly used their strength and knowledge they will make sure that whatever was started would be finished professionally.

#### 7. Perception of the Self

##### a. Dimensions of the Self

As mentioned above, Americans value the uniqueness of the individual highly. In fact, the form of individualism that is deeply ingrained and seldom questioned pervades action and intrudes into each domain of activity (Stewart and Bennet, 1991: 129). The film series of *Home Alone*, which show how a child can creatively lure his enemies or house thieves to finally have them captured by the police without any outside help, is an admirable example of what confidence in the self

can do. Words such as ‘me’ and ‘my’ (Deese, 1965: 205) indicate the unexamined privacy of self – references.

With regards to the individuals as the sole decision maker, American advisors are usually bewildered when confronted with Indonesian students whose life decisions about their own career is influenced and even guided by family considerations. Americans cannot understand their reasoning that their family members are themselves. Most American parents feel that children should make major life decision by themselves. A parent may try to influence a child to follow a particular profession but the child is free to choose another career. Sometimes children do precisely the opposite of what their parent’s wish in order to assert their independence. A son may deliberately decide not to go into his father’s business because of a fear that he will lose his autonomy in his father’s workplace. The independence from parents and children is not an indication that parents and children do not love each other. Strong love between parents and children is universal and this is no exception in the American family. Coexisting with such love in the American family are cultural values of self – reliance and independence.

b. Individualism and Individuality

The word ‘individuality’ and ‘individualism’ is similar yet different in the following way. Individuality implies the cultivation of differences but at the same time acceptance of obligations in narrow but well – defined spheres. Individualism of Americans reflects a continuous frontier between the individual and the culture. With individualism, the self is the basic unit of the culture and the pressures and uniform in all spheres of activity. The individualism of American culture does not prescribe specified obligations for the individual, but at the same, it affords much less freedom (Stewart and Bennet, 1991: 136).

The custom of American parents to put a newborn in a separate room that belongs only to the child illustrates how the mother stresses on the newborn’s individuality as a concrete point of reference. Besides preserving parent’s privacy the custom helps the child get used to having his or her own room, which is seen as a first step toward personal independence and a closely related value, individualism, in high esteem. Parents try to instill these prevailing values in their children. American English expresses these value preferences: children should “cut the (umbilical) cord” and are encouraged not to be “tied to their mothers’ apron.” In other words, Americans are encouraged from an early age to make decisions for themselves, develop their own opinions, solve their own problems, have their own possessions, and in general, learn to view the world from the individual self. Many children are taught at a very early age to make decisions and be

responsible for their actions. Often children work for money outside the home as a first step in establishing autonomy. Nine – or ten year old children may deliver newspapers in their neighborhoods and save or spend their earnings. Teenagers (13 to 18 years) may baby – sit at neighbors' homes in order to earn a few dollars a week. Receiving a weekly allowance at an early age teaches children to budget their money, preparing them for future financial independence.

In Indonesia, the custom putting a newborn in a separate room is not cultivated or even tolerated. A child usually has his or her own room when he or she is two or more years old. It is also uncommon for nine – year – old children to work for money. Indonesian children, therefore, at times suffer from culture shock when faced with the idea that they suddenly have to take care of their own meals, study habits, and other individual needs in a town far from their home to pursue for a respectably good retired education. For Americans, the culture shock is minimal because living in another town and overseas is just like their hometown.

c. Self – reliance: Mythic Individualism or Independence:

Of all the culture norms associated with individualism, none is stronger than the idea of self – reliance. Americans talk fondly of 'pulling themselves up by their bootstraps' to become self – made man. This idea was fostered by the frontier experience, i.e. when the first American settlers arrived in wild country. Land had to be cleared of trees in order to make farms; mines had to be developed; houses, shops, and public buildings had to be built. All of these cultivated the glorification of the self made man among the Americans. The frontier experience also encouraged energetic activity and dignified labor with the hands. It made of the independence, self – reliant farmer a symbol, while still influences American nation life. It produced a resourceful, inquisitive, practical – minded type, able to turn his hand to any sort of work, preparing to govern himself in small, easy manageable communities, inventive, quickly adaptable to a new environment, relatively free of class distinctions, full of optimism and faith in the country that had rewarded him so well.

The fierce, self – reliance originally utilitarian advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson has, to an extent, given way to more expressive forms. For many Americans, the search of autonomy, self – actualization and personal growth has supplemented the mythic desire to save frontier towns single – handedly from outlaw bands. At present, regged self – reliance is only prevent seen in movies, like in the heroes in rambo, aliens and robocop.

## C. CONCLUSION

Americans' way of life manifested in the popular culture products such as TV, films, advertisement and colloquial expression heard on radio should be carefully considered especially by foreigners. It turns out to be a culture that cannot be blindly copied just for the sake of appearing modern or global. The American values of work, play, obligation, time management, equality, competition, cooperation, and fair play are supported by the success as a goal orientation, insistence of having the obligation to achieve self – reliance and the motivation to become individuals who are committed to arrange their own qualities based on their own deadlines.

The Americans' open – minded and frank expressions turn out to be the result of achieving a powerful self having the ability to decide from an early age. Therefore, it is understandable now for an Indonesian in the American English, there is at the same time an existence of the cultural themes of going west for better living opportunity, rugged individualism in Malboro cigarette advertisement, the search for self – identity and equality in the heroes of the romance/adventure genre novels, cinema, or films, as well as the direct eye – to – eye, direct and informal expressions in its conversations.

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